



Snapshots of Innovative Vacant Property Strategies

By Joe Schilling

Abandonment is a national issue that knows no borders. Vacant properties infest the Rustbelt cities of Buffalo and Cleveland. Even booming cities in the West, such as Tucson and San Diego, have isolated pockets of vacant properties scattered through their older, declining neighborhoods. Vacant properties now have a foothold in many first-tier suburban communities across the country. According to the Brookings Institution, vacant properties make up about 15 percent of the typical large city, which represents more than 12,000 acres on average.

As many communities have learned, failure to contain the blight and decay that germinates from vacant properties compounds neighborhood deterioration. According to James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's classic "Broken Window" theory, ignoring one vacant house on a block can lead to others. And one blighted block can send an entire neighborhood spinning into decay. Just ask the longtime residents of Detroit, Buffalo, Philadelphia, and Cleveland, who have witnessed the demise of their great neighborhoods.

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Smart Growth America— A Vision for Our Country

By Parris N. Glendening

Across America, the scarcity of decent, affordable workforce housing has reached a crisis. And, yet, as too many families struggle to pay a disproportionate percentage of their income on housing, hundreds of thousands of housing units sit vacant and abandoned across the country. Developing effective strategies to reuse vacant and abandoned property is one of the most critical challenges facing our country, and it is a driving force behind Smart Growth America's mission.

Growing "smart" means involving citizens in choosing a future that provides housing options for everyone, protects farmland and open space, revitalizes neighborhoods, and offers a variety of convenient transportation options. Sadly, in many communities 15 percent or more of the building stock is vacant, and building and rehabilitation codes often make reusing these valuable assets difficult and cost-prohibitive. These systemic obstacles push residents seeking affordable homes farther out into the suburbs, which requires new public investments and results in sprawl and the abandonment of older properties in our existing communities.

In Maryland, where I served as governor from 1995 to 2003, development rules made it unnecessarily difficult and expensive to bring old or vacant buildings back to life. When I took office, one of my highest priorities was to make it easier for developers to invest in existing communities.

My administration used two basic tools to make this possible. First, we completely rewrote the Building Rehabilitation Code to make it easier and less costly to restore older buildings. Second, we enhanced the Historic Preservation Tax Credit, broadening the existing credit from real estate to include credit on income taxes. Previously, the liability was



The Honorable Parris N. Glendening is president of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute and former governor of Maryland.

only on property taxes, which did not have a significant impact on private investors and developers. With this change, we saw the number of credits jump dramatically, from 37 projects in 1997 to 291 projects in 2001, totaling more than \$200 million in private investment.

Most mayors and governors do not wake up each morning thinking, "I need to rewrite those tax credits and building rehabilitation codes!" But strong leadership and training for our elected officials is crucial for creating effective development policies. The Smart Growth Leadership Institute, part of Smart Growth America, works with state and local officials as well as business and community leaders across the country to help implement new policies. Some state leaders, including Governors Mitt Romney (R-Mass.), Jennifer Granholm (D-Mich.), and Edward Rendell (D-Pa.), already have taken the lead.

Through the continued work of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute, we can bring about a different vision of the future—a future where citizens do not have to pay escalating housing costs, forced to live farther away from their daily needs at the mercy of rising gas prices. A better future is possible—a future in which vacant properties can be reused to create housing options and to revitalize neighborhoods, while providing transportation options and creating a unique sense of place.

Housing Facts & Findings

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The good news is that communities across the country are taking action to prevent abandonment from happening in the first place and to acquire and reuse existing vacant properties. State and local officials are working with private- and nonprofit-sector partners to transform drug houses into affordable homes and vacant lots into community gardens.

Four years ago Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson convened a local housing and vacant property working group. The group's recommendations set forth a holistic blueprint for reclaiming vacant properties that Peterson and his staff continue to follow. The mayors of Baltimore and Philadelphia also have launched citywide initiatives to reclaim thousands of abandoned row houses and reuse vacant lots. Mayor O'Malley's Baltimore 5000 and Philadelphia Mayor Street's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative have devoted millions of dollars in city resources and financing to demolish and acquire vacant properties. These initiatives also have spawned several innovative practices, including the use of receivership, neighborhood information systems, and systematic code enforcement. In New York City, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development has helped to transform nearly all of the city's 5,000 vacant lots dating back to the 1980s into affordable homes and community-driven revitalization projects. And, earlier this year, Louisville Mayor Jerry Abrahamson launched the city's first comprehensive housing strategy that tailors its policies to the unique character of the city's diverse neighborhoods. Louisville's plan emphasizes affordable housing and infill development along with the prevention and acquisition of vacant properties through its Blight Busters and land bank programs.

Background

As San Diego Assistant City Attorney Diane Silva Martinez has said, "Behind every vacant property is a story; the trick is to find the story and address the underlying issues." To develop effective strategies to manage

the problem, policy-makers must fully understand these stories — the multiple causes of property neglect and abandonment.

For some properties the story might involve the owner's personal financial difficulties brought on by job loss, divorce, or death. In other cases predatory lending and fraudulent property transactions, such as flipping, can accelerate property vacancies in a neighborhood. Speculators turned slumlords may not have the financial means or commitment to manage and maintain their portfolio of dilapidated properties in habitable condition. Finally, economic development trends, including industrial downsizing and sprawl, also can be major contributors to the accumulation of abandoned homes and vacant storefronts.

Effective vacant property initiatives contain two or more of the following four strategies:

- 1) Real property information systems to inventory and track vacant properties
- 2) Code enforcement to prevent and abate abandoned property
- 3) Land bank programs and policies to acquire and manage abandoned property
- 4) Land-use plans to strategically guide long-term vacant property reuse and reinvestment

Real Property Information Systems

One of the first things any municipality must do is to determine the number of actual and potential vacant properties. Few cities know the answer to this critical question. Armed with good data, local officials can use their resources more efficiently by devoting resources to the areas that need the most attention.

Through a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, the City of Philadelphia's Neighborhood Information System (NIS) provides city officials and community groups with current and comprehensive real property information, ranging from properties with code violations to those with active building permits. The university acts as a data intermediary to ensure compatibility among databases, and it also facilitates data sharing among government agencies and community organizations. Additionally, the university uses this information to create geographic information systems maps. Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland is now



working with city officials and community development leaders to design a similar information system.

City officials also can coordinate vacant property walking inventories while they design a more elaborate real property information system. Two years ago in York, Pa., teams of students, residents, and city staff combed the city searching for boarded buildings and dilapidated houses. York's extensive walking inventory revealed fewer vacant properties than originally believed and helped the city focus its rehabilitation and code enforcement resources.

Prevention and Abatement Strategies

Communities must wage a multipronged battle to prevent properties from becoming vacant and to abate those that are derelict and dilapidated. This includes fighting mortgage foreclosures, providing repair programs to fix deteriorating properties, and ensuring effective code enforcement.

First, rapid increases in mortgage foreclosures can trigger serious housing abandonment. State and local governments have a range of foreclosure prevention tools (e.g., city or national hotlines, lending institution working groups, foreclosure counseling, emergency loans, and anti-fraud programs) that work with residents, lenders, and housing advocates.

Second, a number of cities have prevention programs that provide low-interest loans and grants to help homeowners—including elderly individuals and those on fixed incomes—make necessary repairs to their homes. For example, through a partnership among local banks, foundations, and the city government, Cleveland's Fix Up Fund offers homeowners low-interest rehabilitation loans (up to \$20,000) in 24 Cleveland neighborhoods. The Cuyahoga County Ohio Treasurer's

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Home Improvement Loan Program (HELP) writes down the loan cost for owners who want to repair their single-family and multifamily properties. As of February, 2005, this linked deposit program has made more than 5,000 loans worth more than \$63 million.

Finally, code enforcement is a strategy that can both prevent and abate vacant properties. A comprehensive code enforcement program is still the best preventive medicine a community can have.

Several cities, such as Columbus, Ohio, and San Diego, Calif., have dedicated teams of code enforcement attorneys that file criminal actions and civil injunctions to abate derelict and vacant properties. In states such as California, New Jersey, and Ohio, judges can appoint community development groups to act as special court receivers that oversee the repairs of substantially substandard properties.

One code compliance strategy gaining popularity is routine rental inspection ordinances. Instead of relying exclusively on complaints about substandard rental units, several cities now proactively inspect all of the rental apartments and duplexes on a staggered time table. The City of Los Angeles' Systematic Code Enforcement Program—winner of the 2005 Fannie Mae Foundation and Harvard Ash Innovations Award in Affordable Housing—has inspected more than 90 percent of the city's multifamily housing stock and corrected more than 1.5 million habitability violations since its inception in 1998.

Effective compliance and enforcement programs actively engage community groups in preventing and abating vacant properties. In Louisville, Ky., the Building and Housing Code Enforcement Program routinely holds neighborhood forums and weekend cleanups to identify and address problem properties. The Memphis Community Development Partnership brought together dozens of neighborhood groups under the umbrella of its Problem Properties Collaborative to remove abandoned vehicles as the first step toward tackling vacant properties. It is now

The Envelope, Please...

By Christina Tucker

Round Sixteen of the Fannie Mae Foundation's Maxwell Awards of Excellence, in partnership with the National Vacant Properties Campaign, focused on exemplary projects that reclaimed vacant and abandoned property in the production of affordable housing. The 35 top projects produced more than 1,400 affordable homes and represented more than \$250 million in overall development costs. The following projects and related organizations received top honors.

Most Impressive Overall Housing Benefit: Projects with the most impressive housing outcomes, particularly those that increase the supply of high-quality housing affordable to households at or below 50 percent of area median income and have long-term affordability mechanisms.

Winning Project: **Harold Washington Unity Cooperative**

Winning Organization: **Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation**, www.bickerdike.org (Chicago, Ill.)

Most Innovative Partnership: Projects showcasing vacant property reclamation efforts that resulted from or were substantially improved by innovative partnerships, defined as partnerships with entities that come from outside the housing field.

Winning Project: **Acushnet Commons**

Winning Organization: **Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development**, www.wihed.org (New Bedford, Mass.)

Most Successful Public/Private Partnership: Projects that employed innovative project-related partnerships between a nonprofit organization and a governmental agency and/or private entity.

Winning Project: **Tierra del Sol**

Winning Organization: **New Economics for Women**, www.neweconomicsforwomen.org (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Most Effective Catalyst for Community Revitalization: Projects that have successfully sparked sustained revitalization by accomplishing one or more goals, such as increased private sector investment, improved housing conditions and opportunities, increased community business and employment opportunities, and/or increased property values.

Winning Project: **Reviviendo Family Housing**

Winning Nonprofit Developer: **Lawrence Community Works**, www.lcworks.org (Lawrence, Mass.)

For more information about the Maxwell Awards of Excellence Program, please visit www.fanniemaefoundation.org/grants/maxwell_awards.shtml.

working with the local Environmental Court to accept cases filed directly by citizens.

Strategies to Acquire and Manage Vacant Properties

When owners walk away from their properties, public agencies and their nonprofit partners must step in to acquire and facilitate reuse before the abandoned buildings and vacant lots have a chance to increase the rate of blight and decay.

Land banking is one effective strategy, especially in cities with thousands of tax-delinquent parcels. The Genesee County, Michigan, Land Bank Authority (LBA) has acquired more than 5,000 tax-delinquent properties in Flint. The LBA is working with

city and community leaders to devise neighborhood reuse and reinvestment plans, anticipating the day when people return to Flint. And state law reforms to archaic tax foreclosure processes in Michigan, New Jersey, and Indiana streamline and further enhance the powers of local governments to acquire and transfer vacant properties into the hands of good-faith owners.

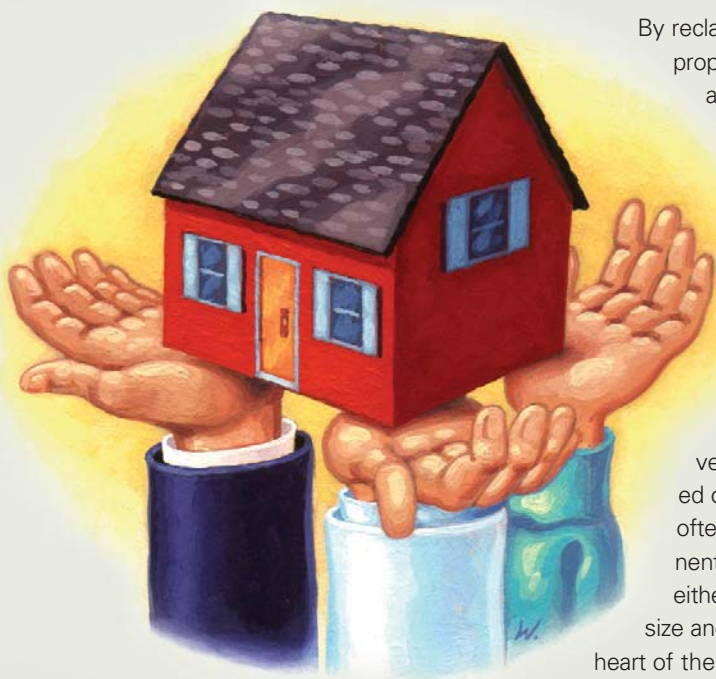
Strategies to Plan and Facilitate Vacant Property Reuse

Not all abandoned homes and vacant lots, however, can become homes or businesses again. Community and civic leaders need to develop a full menu of innovative

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Maxwell Awards of Excellence Highlight Promising Vacant Property Projects and Lessons

By Jennifer R. Leonard



By reclaiming vacant properties to produce affordable homes, nonprofit organizations not only change countless lives but also change the future of entire neighborhoods. Properties redeveloped by dedicated organizations are often the most prominent in a community—either by virtue of their size and location in the heart of the neighborhood or by historical and cultural significance.

Once symbols of neglect and despair, these properties now stand as symbols of rebirth and hope.

The Fannie Mae Foundation, in partnership with the National Vacant Properties Campaign, has focused the Sixteenth Anniversary Maxwell Awards of Excellence on affordable housing created through vacant property reclamation. This year's awards showcase outstanding developments that transform the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

In the world of affordable housing development, nonprofit organizations are used to working hard. But redeveloping vacant properties is an even more difficult task that involves numerous obstacles, including lengthy acquisition procedures, historic preservation considerations, environmental abatement, zoning variances, and subsidy restrictions. This year's Maxwell Award applicants exemplify the vision, commitment, and leadership needed to return vacant buildings and land into productive use—from Savannah, Ga., to Los Angeles, Calif., and from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to the Bronx, N.Y.

Along the way, these organizations discovered important lessons relevant to all housing professionals. The following stories highlight just a few of the innovative strategies the applicants used, including increasing

meaningful civic engagement, fostering long-lasting partnerships, selecting critical properties to ignite a larger strategy, and creating supportive policies. The examples are drawn from this year's Maxwell Award applicants, including the actual winners (see related box) and some of the other excellent projects.

Increasing Meaningful Civic Engagement

The goal of a vacant property strategy is larger than simply reusing properties; reuse must be done in a way that improves the neighborhood and the lives of those living there. The voices of neighborhood residents, business leaders, and other stakeholders must be heard and heeded throughout the project. This type of civic engagement keeps the goals clear and increases the chances of success.

Maxwell Award winner Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation (BRC), a community-based organization in Chicago, works with a membership of more than 800 residents. Ten years ago a group of families invited BRC to help them create an affordable housing cooperative, one that would help prevent displacement in a soaring real estate market. Through an intense and sustained process, the community participated in choosing the site for the project, which became the Harold Washington Unity Cooperative. The community members acted as essential partners to BRC throughout the planning and political approval stages and structured the cooperative steering committee that gave final approval to the design, construction, and resident selection process. To this day co-op residents organize holiday events, throw block parties, and participate in the local block club.

In Lawrence, Mass., another Maxwell Award winner has led an ongoing organizing and planning project that brings together hundreds of residents, civic organizations, local leaders, and businesses to revitalize the city's North Common neighborhood. With the support of Lawrence CommunityWorks, this strong coalition identified priority properties and community needs and created a vision that is helping to transform the neighborhood into a vibrant community again. The significant and ongoing participation by these stakeholders enabled the project to go forward without neighborhood opposition.

Fostering Long-Lasting Partnerships

Building partnerships—whether between the public and private sectors or with new and unexpected constituencies—has become necessary to completing projects and to meeting residents’ needs. The most successful partnerships may begin with unconventional allies that share compatible missions.

In Los Angeles, Maxwell Award winner New Economics for Women (NEW) brought together the community, city, and state governmental staff, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and others to create a master-planned community complete with housing, a charter school, and a community center on a five-acre site vacated by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The Canoga Park neighborhood desperately needed to create a hub of activity to revitalize the community, which had been devoid of private development since the 1992 riots and 1994 Northridge earthquake. The first of its kind in the area, the project incorporated 119 units of affordable housing along with a charter school with a full-size gym and a community center. Under an agreement with the LAUSD, NEW would build the school to the district’s standards and sell the land and facility to the school district on the condition it would be leased back to the organization to operate. This innovative approach created a new relationship among housing developers and the school district that is being replicated in additional projects.

In New Bedford, Mass., the redevelopment of a vacant school building brought together two organizations dedicated to the empowerment of low-income residents—one through housing (Maxwell Award winner Women’s Institute for Housing and Economic Development) and the other through dedicated social services (NorthStar Learning Centers). Both organizations had their eye on the historic school building in the center of town but realized that they could make a more significant impact and achieve their joint goals—creating affordable homes while also developing on-site programs and community space for residents and the neighborhood—by working together. The space gave NorthStar Learning Centers its first consolidated location and its availability has helped launch a neighborhood association. Key to their strong partnership, which continues today as they seek additional development opportunities, was the idea that everyone came to the table with expertise but not acting as if they had all the answers.

Selecting Critical Properties to Ignite a Larger Strategy

Choosing the right properties to generate neighborhoodwide revitalization isn’t always easy. But in Savannah’s Cuyler-Brownsville neighborhood, two vacant cultural landmarks earmarked for demolition brought together residents, the City, and two housing developers—Mercy Housing and Norsouth Corporation. Florance Street School and Charity Hospital, although vacant for 20 and 30 years, respectively, represented the heart and soul of the community.

Before the hospital and school were redeveloped into Heritage Place Apartments, the neighborhood was filled with vacant, dilapidated structures. When these important properties were given a new purpose in the neighborhood, residents’ excitement and pride grew. Since the redevelopment of Heritage Place Apartments began, 55 new infill homes have broken ground; numerous property owners have made renovations to their homes; a new square has been created; and new streets, sidewalks, and street lighting have been installed. Many residents previously living in substandard housing in the neighborhood have been able to move into the new apartments, and former residents have returned with a renewed sense of pride.

Creating Supportive Policies

Some nonprofit organizations have become experts in the entire process of reclaiming vacant property, including clearing title, acquiring property, developing financing, and rehabilitating and selling the properties. But a few organizations also have recognized that policy changes are critical to the success of any large-scale effort to transform these properties into community assets and to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Two leaders in this approach are the previously mentioned Maxwell awardee Lawrence Community Works (LCW) and Housing and Neighborhood Development Services, Inc. (HANDS) in Orange, N.J. Both organizations have helped write and advocate for new state legislation and local ordinances to facilitate redevelopment of vacant properties. LCW spearheaded passage of the Reviviendo Overlay district, updating an outdated zoning code that stymied the development of thriving communities by prohibiting residential and mixed-use development in the city’s numerous vacant mill buildings. In this first major zoning change in more than 60 years, the new district allows for mixed-use development and diverse

neighborhoods by allowing previously prohibited row-houses in residential neighborhoods. Recognizing that revitalization can mean rising housing costs, the new zoning also requires that at least 10 percent of all units will be affordable. A private developer is now taking on the first major mill building to be developed into housing.

HANDS has long been an expert at vacant property reclamation, clearing title to 59 problem properties in 2004 and 2005 and subsequently redeveloping and selling half. But believing that the war on problem properties would achieve minimal success if it continued to be conducted piecemeal, the organization focused on systemic change by helping to amend state policy (the Abandoned Property Rehabilitation Act) and enact a local ordinance (the Abandoned Property Ordinance) giving municipal government and community organizations new powers over abandoned properties.

Conclusion

These organizations have done more than reclaim and reuse vacant property in their own communities—they have created a road map to help others to do the same. Building affordable homes by reclaiming vacant properties creates a lasting impact that ripples throughout our neighborhoods and cities. The partnerships created specifically for a single project are building blocks for future collaborations lasting long beyond a ribbon-cutting ceremony. In these revitalized neighborhoods, residents, new and old, find ways to be active in their community and support each other. The projects described here are only a few that illustrate how our communities and citizens are better off for it.

Jennifer R. Leonard is director of the National Vacant Properties Campaign.

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designs that consider reuse alternatives, such as green infrastructure. For example, for more than 25 years the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and its award-winning Philadelphia Green Program have been transforming vacant lots into community gardens and neighborhood pocket parks. Philly Green builds the capacity of its community groups so they can fully engage in the site selection, design, reuse, and management of these urban green places.

Citizens and their leaders also need to think long and hard about the economic and demographic prospects of neighborhoods devastated by vacant properties. Many cities have vacant properties that far exceed their current and likely projected populations. Right-sizing these neighborhoods will require reclaiming existing infrastructure and reusing vacant properties for parks, trails, gardens, and greenways. Cities should rewrite their comprehensive plans and zoning codes to facilitate such long-term transformation.

Earlier this year Buffalo adopted its Comprehensive Plan (Queen City in the 21st Century) that includes a unique vacant property asset management strategy that sets forth goals for capitalizing on the city's growing inventory of vacant properties. Youngstown, Ohio's 2010 Comprehensive Plan formally recognizes that it will need to shrink before it can truly rebuild. These comprehensive plans and zoning codes can provide further incentives for infill development and help relieve growth pressures for greenfield development in out-lying counties.

Conclusion

Many cities are facing the harsh reality that vacant properties threaten public safety, incur serious social and environmental costs, and sap municipal budgets. Fortunately, pioneering mayors and community developers recognize that vacant properties also represent unrealized assets that can preserve homes for working families and spark the revitalization of neighborhoods, cities, and regions. As these snapshots illustrate, local leaders are using innovative vacant property initiatives to create the right climate for private reinvestment while rebuilding social and political capital.

Joe Schilling is a professor in Practice at Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute in Alexandria, Va.

Insight

"Vacant and abandoned housing breeds crime, promotes poverty, blights communities and cripples neighborhoods ... the blight of vacant and abandoned housing is unacceptable, and governments at every level need to work together to fix the problem."

Mayor Michael B. Coleman
in his 2006 State of the
City address
Columbus, Ohio

Web Sites

The National Vacant Properties Campaign provides information resources, tools, and assistance to support vacant property revitalization efforts across the country. (www.vacantproperties.org)

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Green City Strategy addresses the problem of vacant land and promotes a citywide vacant land greening and management system. (www.pennsylvaniahorticultural.org/phlgreen/city_strategy.html)

Visit **KnowledgePlex®** at www.knowledgeplex.org to find more resources, news, and information about reclaiming vacant and abandoned property. KnowledgePlex®, a Web portal implemented by the Fannie Mae Foundation, supports the efforts of affordable housing and community development practitioners, grantors, policy-makers, and scholars.

DataPlace™

at www.dataplace.org, by KnowledgePlex®, is your free online source for precise housing and demographic data about your community, your region, and the nation. DataPlace™ offers the relevant statistics you need in the easy-to-use format you want.

City of Buffalo Comprehensive Plan outlines a vacant property asset management strategy to address the city's goals of bringing its vacant and abandoned property stock back into productive reuse. (www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/SPlanning/BufaloCompPlan2004.pdf)

City of New York Department of Housing Preservation and Development has reduced its vacant property inventory from tens of thousands to a few hundred, creating community and economic revitalization throughout the city and affordable housing opportunities for hundreds of thousands of its residents. (www.nyc.gov/html/hpd/html/developers/vacant-land-development.shtml)

Louisville Landbank Authority acquires, manages and sells distressed properties and vacant unimproved parcels to responsible developers who can affect increased property values and stimulate the tax base. (www.louisvilleky.gov/Housing/Landbank+Authority+Inc.htm)

Philadelphia Neighborhood Transformation Initiative is a multifaceted program designed to renew and strengthen entire communities by eradicating blight to improve the appearance of Philadelphia streetscapes; advance the quality of life in Philadelphia neighborhoods with a targeted and coordinated blight prevention program; and improve the City's ability to assemble land for development. (www.phila.gov/nti/)

Articles and Reports

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